

Developing Leadership Skills in Students With Mild Disabilities

Dawn Imada

Beverly A. Doyle

Barbara Brock

Amber Goddard

Just as there is no single definition of leadership, there is no simple formula on how to become a leader (see box, "What Is Leadership?"). Many self-development books—and leaders themselves—attest to the fact that leadership is based on opportunity and experience. In fact, Betz (1981) believed that the environment determines whether one becomes a leader. Leadership may never be demonstrated if the environment does not call on one's potential. He cautioned that people should not change their personalities to fit the guidelines of established leaders, but rather adapt to a situation. Leadership can be developed. This article shows how.

How Do You Become a Good Leader?

Becoming a good leader involves understanding and being able to demonstrate the building blocks of leadership. This foundation is threefold: *principles*—understanding the doctrines governing leadership; *traits*—developing the qualities demonstrating leadership; and *skills*—demonstrating the evidence of leadership (Frigon & Jackson, 1996).

Frigon and Jackson's (1996) leadership model is a basic guide to leadership

development. It involves understanding leadership theory (building blocks), creating a vision through the integration of these blocks, self-assessment, and action. In essence, leadership starts with self-leadership and eventually transpires to others. Self-leadership begins by asking four questions: Who am I? Where do I want to go? Whom do I need and want to go with me? and How do we get there?

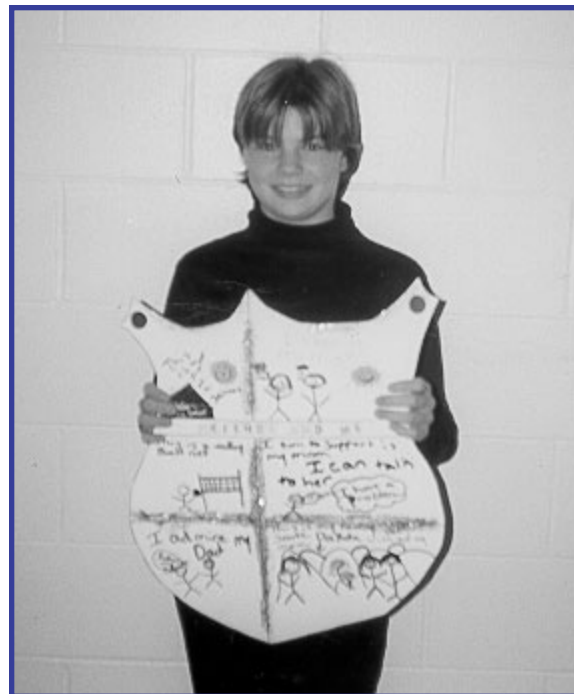
- **Who am I?** Answering this question involves knowing what you stand for and evaluating what skills and means you have to achieve your vision. Personal values, strengths, weaknesses, skills, talents, and goals all are part of this. Understanding oneself is a prerequisite for developing your talents and leadership skills.
- **Where do I want to go?** This is a leader's vision and allows achievement of one's highest goals.
- **Whom do I need and want to go with me?** The path to a goal is never easy, so leaders ensure that they choose partners that share and com-

plement their own personal values and competencies.

- **How do I get there?** This is a leader's plan of action to achieve the vision. This involves setting measurable goals and objectives and following through with appropriate action.

Leadership begins with a person's desire to lead and the willingness to self-assess. Leadership is a continuous process of learning and evaluation.

Self-leadership begins by asking, Who am I? and Where do I want to go?



Coat of Arms

What About Educational Leadership?

Wesley (1998) outlined 11 qualities inherent to the teaching profession: empathy, ability to create partnerships, accountability, the ability to embrace adversity, the ability to consider the long term, competency, desire, ability to go the distance, acceptance, ability to admit mistakes and fix them, and patience. Ironically, these qualities coincide directly with the previously described leadership principles.

Leaders and educators have similar goals. Both strive for excellence and a sense of personal and social responsibility. They seek this through the advancement of human thought and action and the attainment of these possibilities for their followers and students.

Thus, we as educators can develop student leaders. We must remember, however, that possible leaders may never lead if their surroundings do not call for their potential. We can call for this potential by promoting student self-awareness.

We can present leadership possibilities to students every day. In doing so, we can establish self-confidence, engender responsibility and consequences, and push students to challenge themselves and excel beyond what is expected.

Wesley (1998) stated that it is important to keep believing in students even when they are failing, disruptive, suspended, or expelled. Believing in them is important, especially when they do not believe in themselves. We have the capacity to not only impart knowledge and life lessons, but to ignite the potential for leadership within each student. Educators are leaders in every way and are the best hope for developing the leaders of the future.

Leadership Lessons for Students With Mild Disabilities

When we seek to develop leadership within our students, we often overlook students with mild disabilities. Although these students face challenges that other students may not have, they are not precluded from developing leadership skills. Developing the leadership potential within students with mild disabilities involves understanding the par-

ticular characteristics of these students. Students with mild disabilities include those with mental retardation, learning disabilities, physical and sensory deficits, and emotional and behavioral disorders.

Most students with mild disabilities display poor self-image, lack of interest in school, low achievement, slower learning rate, difficulty in transferring general knowledge to other pertinent areas (Schulz & Carpenter, 1995). We can help compensate for these disabilities by addressing the individual needs of each student. Areas in which students require extra assistance include organization, skill development, learning strategies, and compensatory techniques (Schulz & Carpenter).

We can provide assistance to students with mild disabilities by increasing their opportunity to succeed academically and providing a basis for developing leadership skills. In nurturing these students, we can develop leaders. Consider people such as Helen

What Is Leadership?

President Theodore Roosevelt once remarked, "I do not know what a leader is, but I know one when I see one." Despite definitions found in dictionaries, we in education have yet to define one all encompassing model of a perfect "leader." In many ways, defining leadership is reflected by the definers themselves—through their experiences, values, and perceptions.

Betz (1981) described a leader as one whose personal excellence earns the respect of those around him or her. A leader manages interpersonal relationships and accomplishes objectives while displaying personal integrity, courage, sensitivity, and commitment.

- **Integrity** is respect of oneself. A person accomplishes integrity through an individually set standard of honesty and character. Leaders have strong values that are consistent with their actions.
- **Courage** refers to one's ability to take risks. Blank (1995) stated that leaders live without safety nets. Life without safety nets inevitably brings its set of challenges to which leaders must be willing to adapt. This means being flexible in thoughts and actions, being persistent and determined when times get tough, and being willing to venture into the unknown.
- Leaders are **sensitive** and share common concerns. In doing so, leaders obtain their followers. After all, people want leaders who empathize, who are trustworthy, and who maintain neutral loyalty.
- **Commitment** is also essential. Leaders envision, follow through, and accept responsibility for both positive and negative outcomes, sustaining their involvement during difficult times. Leaders must have boundless energy and stamina in which to accomplish such monumental tasks. Additional leadership qualities include effective communication, a positive mental attitude, respect, teamwork, fact-based decision making, and effective use of resources (Frigon & Jackson, 1996).

Keller, Thomas Edison, and Winston Churchill, all of whom had disabilities.

Designing Activities to Teach Leadership Skills: A Pilot Study

We conducted a pilot study to determine whether activities designed to teach leadership skills would improve school involvement and attendance of students with mild disabilities.

We included 12 students with mild disabilities in a rural Nebraska school in the pilot project. They ranged in age from 12 to 18 and were in Grades 7 through 12.

When we seek to develop leadership within our students, we often overlook students with mild disabilities.



This student takes on a leadership role by directing a skit.

Leadership Conference

All student participants attended bimonthly leadership workshops. These workshops were conducted for 90 minutes by a special educator and student teacher and included a hands-on activity on a topic related to leadership and journal writing for personal reflection. In addition, each student served as a mentor on a weekly basis with a second-grade student. Table 1 describes the leadership workshops.

Social Skills Survey

In addition, students met with a special education teacher for a 30-minute period weekly to discuss their attendance, grades, activities, and progress.

We collected data at the beginning of the project, 1997-98, and at the end of the 1998-99 school year, in the areas of absences/tardies, activities/involvement,

adult/peer relationships, and scores on the Social Skills Survey.

We developed the Social Skills Survey (see Figure 1), modeling it after the Boys Town Social Skills Model. The instrument focused on adult relations, peer relations, school rules, classroom behaviors, and leadership skills. We gathered survey data from one special educator and four general education classroom teachers. These teachers were not informed of the leadership workshops being conducted.

Results of the Pilot Study

Data on Absences and Tardies

Data on absences and tardies (see Table 2) indicated that five students decreased their absences and tardies, four students' absences remained unchanged, and three increased. The three students whose absences increased had medical excuses. Data were unavailable for four students because they had moved. The school is located in an area where migratory farm workers' children attend school. Mobility in this population is common. The increase in attendance in five students may have resulted from increased interest and commitment to school after the project began.

Data on Students' Activities

Students' activities and involvement include both school and community

activities. Of the five students whose involvement decreased, three students were seniors; and their projected activity involvement declined because they stated that they were not aware of what opportunities for involvement would exist in the community. Two students' activity involvement was projected to increase, and five projected their involvement to remain constant (see Table 3).

The types of activities that students were involved with also changed. For example, one student tried out for cheerleading when tryouts were held. Another student ran for a national office in a horseman's club he belonged to. These are activities those students had not previously considered.

Data on Adult/Peer Relationships

Teachers rated each student's relationships using the Social Skills Survey (see Table 4 for results). A total score was computed by adding item scores and dividing by the number of items. The participating teachers noted that 10 students were more cooperative and got along with their classmates better after they had attended the leadership workshops. They participated in classroom activities and discussions and volunteered for school projects.

Data on Leadership Skills

Leadership skills in 9 of the 12 students increased slightly over the school year. Scores were averaged for each category on the Social Skills Survey, and the entire list was averaged to obtain an overall leadership score (see Table 5). Although we noted only slight improvement in scores, journal entries reflected that students had a better understanding of what a leader is and does.

We have the capacity to not only impart knowledge and life lessons, but to ignite the potential for leadership within each student.

A leader manages interpersonal relationships and accomplishes objectives while displaying personal integrity, courage, sensitivity, and commitment.

Table 1. Leadership Workshops

QUESTION	OBJECTIVE	ACTIVITY	JOURNAL
What is Leadership?	Students describe their leadership skills and formulate the qualities that they find important in leadership.	Create a collage depicting leadership qualities.	Students write what a leader is, and what leadership skills they possess.
What are my personal values and beliefs?	To allow students the opportunity to clarify their important values and beliefs.	Create a personal “Coat of Arms”	Students write values that leaders have, and what personal values they have that would be needed in a leader.
Goal Setting	Teaching students to formulate and write personal goals.	Write educational and personal goals for yearly, monthly, weekly and daily implementation.	Students write how goal setting is needed for leaders.
Plan of Action	Demonstrating how to operationalize goals into a plan of action.	Ask students to formulate a plan indicating how and when they can implement their goals.	Students write how leaders must have an action plan.
Communication	Discussion of the importance of listening and being aware of non-verbal communication such as body language.	Making peanut butter jelly sandwiches. Students make sandwich as another gives directions.	Discuss how communication can impact on the outcome of an activity.
Leadership Styles	Discussion of different leadership traits and how different individuals accomplish leadership.	View “Sandlot” and discuss leaders and their characteristics.	Students write about leadership qualities in characters in movie.
Team Building	Teaching students how individuals contribute to a team to accomplish goals.	Untying a human knot, Mousetrap Mine Field—blindfolded, students walk through a make-believe mine field.	Students write how teamwork is needed to accomplish goals.
Ethical Decision Making	Discussion of factors involved in making ethical decisions.	Students are given scenarios and must design skits involving ethical decision making.	Students write about the decisions made in the skits.
Risk Taking	Discussion of situations that might involve risk and how they might be resolved.	Students reflect times they took a risk and situations they are involved in that might require risk taking.	Students write about how and why risk taking is needed.
Mentoring	Discussion of how to be a mentor and ways to mentor.	Students are assigned a student to mentor.	Students write about how they assisted the students.
Celebrations	Reflection on leadership.	Review of journals. Discussion of what was accomplished.	Students write about what leadership is and the qualities they have that make them a good leader.

Figure 1. Social Skills Survey

1 — No Opportunity to Observe	2 — Never	3 — Rarely
4 — Occasionally	5 — Often	6 — Very Frequently
A. Adult Relations	1. Follows verbal instruction 2. Accepts criticism 3. Greets 4. Introduces self 5. Makes requests 6. Gives compliments 7. Accepts compliments 8. Accepts “No” for an answer 9. Makes conversation 10. Disagrees appropriately 11. Apologizes 12. Volunteers	
B. Peer Relations	13. Complies with reasonable request 14. Accepts criticism 15. Accepts “no” for an answer 16. Greets 17. Introduces self 18. Makes requests 19. Gives compliments 20. Accepts compliments 21. Makes conversation 22. Participates in activities 23. Disagrees appropriately 24. Gives negative feedback 25. Resists peer pressure 26. Reports peer behavior 27. Apologizes 28. Volunteers	
C. School Rules	29. Responsible with school property 30. Maintains good attendance 31. Follows dress code and neat appearance 32. Walks quietly in school building 33. Refrains from possessing/glamorizing contraband 34. Is honest	
D. Classroom Behaviors	35. Attends to listening activities 36. Participates in discussions 37. Contributes to group projects 38. Remains on task 39. Completes homework assignments 40. Asks permission 41. Works independently 42. Gets attention appropriately	
E. Leadership Skills	43. Demonstrates caring 44. Displays citizenship 45. Takes initiative 46. Is dependable 47. Is committed 48. Organized in daily activities/projects 49. Demonstrates fairness 50. Displays integrity 51. Provides a role model for others 52. Shows flexibility 53. Works cooperatively 54. Delegates authority 55. Communicates effectively 56. Demonstrates loyalty 57. Shows respect 58. Shows tolerance 59. Exercises good judgment 60. Demonstrates awareness of own abilities	

Table 2. Absences/Tardies

Students	1997-98	1998-1999
1	24	7
2		6
3	8	9
4	23	14
5	16	3
6	—	—
7	19	18
8	3	11
9	6	3
10	—	—
11	—	—
12	—	—

For example, when given the activity on ethical decision making, students were asked to plan and act out a skit. One student commented in his journal that another student in the group demonstrated leadership by assuming a role as director in the skit. Another student mentioned that she felt that by being a mentor to a younger student, she demonstrated leadership skills. All students indicated that they could see themselves as a leader in some area, and felt that it would be possible to gain further skills in leadership. This was a tremendous change from their original perceptions that they had nothing to offer at all.

The development of students' perceptions of leadership and their boosted self-esteem were the most critical evidence of the effect this pilot program had on these students. The informal nature of the pilot project, the migratory characteristics of the student population, and the diversity of the students

We can increase the opportunities of students with mild disabilities to succeed academically, and we can provide a basis for developing leadership skills.

Designing a Leadership Program

1. Review student records and interview students regarding their interests and talents.
2. Use a social-skills survey and determine students' strengths and weaknesses in leadership.
3. Plan workshop topics based on student interests and the skills they need to develop.
4. Locate resources to assist in developing seminars. Possible resources include the following:
 - a. Zamm, M., Ortner, R., & DeAngelis, B. (1990). *Training student organizers curriculum* (rev. ed.). New York: Council on the Environment of New York City. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 328 424)
 - b. Hughes, S. (1987). *Learning to be a leader*. North Carolina: National Association of Gifted Children. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 303 937)
 - c. Thomas, H. G., Jr. (1987). *Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL) program. Program summary*. Developed by Austin Independent School District, Austin, Texas. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 292 047)
 - d. Reumer, L., & Reumer, D. (1986). Peer helpers—Increasing positive student involvement in school. *School Counselor*, 34(1), 62-66. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 343 516)
 - e. Youth Leadership. Intercultural Development Research Association Focus. (1995). *IDRA Newsletter*, 22(9), 1-42. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 389 497)
5. Make activities multisensory and include hands-on activities, such as skits, art projects, posters, and computer activities.
6. When teaching leadership concepts, use movies, visual aids, current events, and people to engage students in the topic.
7. Set up weekly meetings to monitor student progress and adjust program or add workshops.

Table 4. Adult/Peer Relationships

Students	Fall	Spring
1	4.5	5.5
2	5.2	5.7
3	6.8	6.6
4	5.0	5.9
5	3.8	4.8
6	5.9	6.1
7	4.5	5.5
8	4.3	4.9
9	6.0	6.2
10	4.5	4.6
11	5.5	5.2
12	5.0	5.2

Table 5. Leadership Skills

Students	Fall	Spring
1	7.4	8.8
2	8.5	9.1
3	9.5	9.8
4	8.7	8.2
5	6.3	6.4
6	9.1	9.4
7	6.8	8.0
8	7.5	7.7
9	9.2	9.2
10	8.5	8.2
11	7.5	8.4
12	8.0	8.3

involved (in age, developmental levels, and personality) precluded any firm statistical results. But we believe that leadership conferences, mentoring pro-

grams, and social skills surveys were powerful tools in encouraging leadership skills among students with mild disabilities.

Table 3. Activities/Involvement

Students	Years		
	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000 Planned Involvement
1	3	2	1
2	4	4	7
3	3	1	2
4	3	3	4
5	3	3	4
6	3	1	1
7	3	-	3
8	2	2	2
9	4	4	3
10	2	6	6
11	3	6	5
12	3	1	3

Through activities specifically designed to teach leadership qualities in a hands-on, concrete way, students with mild disabilities were able to increase leadership involvement. In addition, this group of students enhanced many of their leadership qualities, as identified in the literature and measured by the Social Skills Survey. For example, students developed their ability to manage interpersonal relationships and work cooperatively, show personal integrity, and display commitment. We recommend that educators conduct similar programs throughout the school year, not just during one semester—and for *all* students in the school (see box, “Designing a Leadership Program”).

Students developed their ability to manage interpersonal relationships and work cooperatively, show personal integrity, and display commitment.

Final Thoughts

Educators have not always encouraged students with disabilities to take leadership roles. The unsuccessful school and life experiences of many of these students have often resulted in feelings of low self-esteem, which are reflected in academic and behavioral difficulties. School policy often precludes involvement in extra curricular activities if a student has low grades or behavioral

difficulties. This adds to the feeling that many students with mild disabilities already have—that leadership is not possible and not attainable.

History has proven that although someone may have a disability, he or she may still make positive contributions and may attain leadership status. We must nurture this possibility in all students, but particularly those with disabilities.

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Dawn Imada, Teacher, South High School, Omaha, Nebraska. **Beverly A. Doyle**, Associate Professor of Education; and **Barbara Brock**, Associate Professor of Education, Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska. **Amber Goddard**, Special Education Teacher, Waterloo Public Schools, Waterloo, Nebraska.

Address correspondence to Beverly A. Doyle, Department of Education, Creighton University, 2400 California Street, Omaha, NE 68178 (e-mail: bdoyle@creighton.edu)

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